H. P. S. GREENE
THE LUCKY LITTLE STIFF

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France. Mud. A khaki-clad column of fours slogging along to the rhythm of their own muttered but heart-felt blasphemy, a common enough sight in the winter of 1917-1918.

But in one particular this procession of sufferers was unique. On the shoulders of each performer shone bright silver bars, and their more or less manly chests were spanned by Sam Browne belts. A casual observer would have taken them for officers. But no, on each breast was a pair of silver wings, and their uniforms were of well-fitting but variously designed whipcord. The pot-bellied little person in the indecently short yellow serge blouse who led them was an officer; his followers were flying lieutenants.

They were a part of the personnel-in-training of the great American aviation field of Issy-la-Boue, the advance guard of the ten thousand American bombing planes which publicity agents said were going to blast the Huns out of Berlin.

The column passed between two long barracks, one of which, filled to capacity with double-decker bunks, yawned thru an unfinished open end.

"Squads right!" shrilled the pot-bellied one with the captain's bars in a startling tremolo. "Heh!"

The men behind squads-righted in a dispirited fashion and came to a halt in straggling lines. The squawky voice continued:

"I want to say that you are the most undisciplined body of men I ever saw. That ...er... mélée you staged when you were unwittingly marched into—er—contact with a body of enlisted men was the most disgraceful exhibition on the part of officers so-called I ever saw in my life. I... er... want to say you are a disgrace to the service. That's all I want to say. Oh, I... er...believe Lieutenant Crosby has something to say to you."

Flying-Lieutenant Crosby stepped forward and

cleared his throat. He was a born Babbitt, a destined getter-together.

"Men," he began, and then hesitated. Perhaps he should have said "officers," but that wouldn't have sounded right either. He rushed on, "I want to remind you that Happy's and Sam's funeral is this afternoon. All flying is called off as usual. There wasn't much of a crowd out for poor old Bill yesterday. I know it's a long walk and all that but we want to get a good crowd out this afternoon. The cadets are going to try to get a good crowd out for their fellow who got bumped, and we want to get a good crowd out too. That's all I wanted to say."

He retired to the ranks. The fat officer shouted "Dismissed!" Then he changed his mind.

"As you were. The commanding officer wanted me to announce that quarantine to the post is on again until the perpetrator of the outrage of stopping the Paris Express has been discovered and punished. Dismissed!"

The half-broken ranks scattered in the direction of their barracks. Toward the one with the unfinished end went three oddly dissimilar figures. They were

always together, and of course some one had already thought of calling them "The Three Musketeers."

One was short, dark and slim, with pathetic eyes and a dispirited mustache. Another was tall and lathy, with a long lugubrious countenance. The third was blond and almost corpulent.

"I knew it, Tommy, I knew it," said the tall man. "How come you and 'Fat' to pull such a stunt, anyway? Ain't such a joke now, is it? What're you going to do about it?"

The three entered their barrack and sat down on a bunk near the open end, well away from the crowd huddled around the stove in the middle. The little man gazed sadly before him.

His mustache drooped dolefully. Some observant person had remarked that he could read Tommy by his mustache. When it was freshly waxed and pert, he was just going on a party. When it was sorry and unkempt, he had just been on one.

"You know we didn't mean any harm," he said. "All that stuff the frogs put out about our trying to wreck the train was a dish of prunes. As if it wasn't bad enough to miss the truck and walk out here twelve

miles from town without having all this on top of it. When the quarantine for the itch was taken off, and Fat and I got those "thirty-six hours on condition you don't go to Paris" passes, we got by the M. P.'s at the *gare* in Paris all right.

"We went out through the baggage-room. I wasn't in the Ambulance for nothing. We came back into the station the same way, and once we got on the train we went right to sleep. They sure do put up a good champagne cocktail at Henry's, and then all those beers at the Follies!

"Well, when I woke up we were at a station. I looked out and the sign on it said Chateauroux. I knew where we were all right because I've flown over the place. We'd passed Issy. So I woke Fat up and pulled him off the train. There was another train standing in the station, and I asked a frog where it went to and he said it was the Paris Express. So I knew it would take us back to Issy again, and we hopped on.

"We got into a third class compartment with a lot of *poilus*, and they had *beaucoup* red wine, and we drank to *la belle France*, and *les-États-Unis*, and when I woke up again the train was just leaving a station, and the sign said Issy-la-Boue. By the time I realized what it all meant we were going too fast to jump

off, so I pulled that handle on the wall, and the train stopped.

"When we saw how wrought up the frogs were, we beat it. No wonder we had to come over and help them win the war, if they're all as bum shots as those birds were! Guess they thought we were bandits or spies or something. Well, we had to walk home to keep from being A. W. O. Loose from roll-call this morning, and never got home till four o'clock. Suppose after flying, I'll have to go over and 'fess up to Herman, or you birds will never get any more passes. But I know I'll never get one if I stay here for the duration of the war."

"No pass ain't *nothin'* to what you'll get, boy!" said "Long John." "Shot at sunrise, is my bet. But I admire your self-sacrificin' spirit."

"Never mind, we'll take our medicine, won't we, Fat? And if I don't mention you, maybe he won't say anything about it."

Fat grunted dolefully. Outside a bugle blew. The three rose to go.

"It's me and Tommy to fly the eighteen meters," said Long John. "Where do you go, Fat?"

"Machine-gun," was the answer.

"Hum, too bad. I heard the guy they shot there last week croaked. The bullet went right thru his leg, and the quack dressed the place where it went in all right, but forgot to see if it came out. Gangrene set in and his leg rotted off, and they had to shoot him. Now a feller your build, say, it wouldn't go through at all. Just stay there and fester..."

But his victim was gone.

* * * * *

Tommy flew badly that morning. He was all in, his head ached and, besides, he was worrying about that interview with Major Herman Krause. And then he had to practise landings, nervous work at best in an unfamiliar ship. Finally he blew a tire and was bawled out unmercifully by the instructor.

Luckily it was on his tenth and last trip, and he breathed a sigh of relief when the lecture was over and he could go. He went to the barracks and policed up. Shave, shine, but no shampoo. There was hardly enough water for drinking and shaving, and that was brought many miles in tank wagons. Bathing was something one went without at Issy and felt not much the worse unless the scabbies set in.

Once militarily clean, Tommy dragged himself to headquarters, entirely ruining the new shine so painfully acquired. He entered the presence of the adjutant feeling like a whipped schoolboy. He saluted and stood at attention.

"Sir, Lieutenant Lang to speak to the commanding officer."

The adjutant kept on writing for about five minutes at a desk stacked with piles of reports. Then he looked up savagely and spoke with a slight accent:

"What? Oh, yes. What for?"

"About the Paris Express."

"Go right in. He's waiting."

Tommy went in and stood with trembling knees before the C. O. He was a large florid man with beetling brows and his manner was not encouraging.

"You? Well? What about it?"

Tommy explained as well as he could, stressing his innocence. He thought his plea must have softened an executioner, but Major Krause was uncompromising in attitude and words.

"Young man," he said, "you are a disgrace, sir! A disgrace to the United States Army!" Tommy thought he had heard those words before. "We have been having considerable trouble with the guard. Those cadets are the worst disciplined body of men I ever saw." Again a familiar note.

"As for you—you seem to have trouble keeping awake. A permanent assignment as commander of the guard ought to give you beneficial practise at it. Of course, after keeping awake all night, you will need to sleep in the day-time. You are therefore relieved from flying duty. Report at guard mount this evening and every evening until further orders. That will do."

Tommy saluted and went out, his heart sinking. There were only three known ways of getting out of Issy-la-Boue. The first was to break your neck. The second was to fly so well that you were graduated. The third was to fly so poorly that you were sent to Blooey for reclassification, probably as an armament officer. Which was generally considered the lowest form of life so far discovered in the air service.

All these methods were dependent on flying. Once a man was taken off flying duty, it took an act of Congress to get him away from the place.

The little man wended his way back to the barracks. His comrades were sitting on their bunks, and he poured his tale of woe into their receptive ears. Being beyond words, they accorded him silent sympathy. Finally Fat spoke:

"Well, I'm lucky to be out of it. Say, did you hear the news? Brock was washed out on the fifteens this morning."

"That makes seven in a week," said Tommy after a pause. "How'd it happen?"

"Same old thing. Wings came off."

A bugle called. Most of the flying lieutenants went outside and, joining others from near-by barracks, formed in line. A few commands, and they were in one of the rivers of mud which served as roads at the field. Presently they were halted behind three long two-wheeled pushcarts; each cart bore a long box covered with an American flag. The mourners stood in the mud for half an hour waiting, and then a dispirited looking band appeared. Its bass drum echoed *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom*, and the procession started.

Through the gate of the camp it went, and out on to

the main road, while the drum kept up its sad, hollow sound. Yard after yard, rod after rod, until the cortège had walked two miles. Then it turned into a young but flourishing cemetery, with red, raw mounds in orderly lines.

The men were formed around three fresh graves. A pale-faced Y. M. C. A. man stumbled through the burial service. A red-faced Knight of Columbus did likewise. A Frenchman flew over and dropped some dessicated roses. Then they all marched away again; only the boxes and a small burial party remained behind.

The band struggled with its one tune, a lively quick-step, according to regulations. Two old peasants drew their cart to one side of the road to let them pass.

"*Comme ils sont trists, les 'tits Americains!*" said the woman.

"*Quelle musique!*" answered her spouse.

* * * * *

The three chums went back to their bunks.

"Do you birds know anything about being the commander of the guard?" asked Tommy with some concern.

"No," replied Fat.

"Sure," answered Long John. "I was chucked out of the first training camp. First, you have to have a gun."

"A rifle?" asked Tommy.

"No, you little sap. Officers don't carry rifles, or flying lieutenants either. A pistol."

"But I ain't got a pistol."

"Borrow one then. Do you know the general orders?"

"I don't know any generals, orders or debility either."

"Never mind trying to be funny. You may find out it ain't no joke about generals. The Old Boy himself and the Silly Civilian are going to inspect the post tomorrow. I saw the orders over at the operations office for every machine to be up that can get off the ground. I suppose that means a lot more long walks. But it's most time for guard mount; you'd better run along and find a gun."

Tommy disappeared and finally returned with a regulation web belt and holster in one hand, and a .25 caliber automatic in the other.

"What are you going to do with that popgun, you idiot?" asked Long John disgustedly. "Are you going hunting canary birds, or what?"

"I couldn't find a regular gun, and a cadet loaned me this. He said officers had taken it before and put a dirty sock or something in the holster so the butt would just show, and got by all right."

"Very well, then, take one of Fat's socks. The smell may keep you awake. Is the blamed thing loaded? Look out you don't shoot yourself. There's the call, now. Put on your belt. You fool! How many belts are you going to wear? What do you think you are, a past grand master of the Holy Jumpers? Take off your Sam Browne. There, get going, now.

"Well, away he goes, and he doesn't know whether Julius Cesar was stabbed or shot off horseback. Did you ever see the like, Fat? But I bet he comes out all right some way, the lucky little stiff. I never knew it to fail. Well, let's go up by the stove."

But Tommy wasn't such a complete fool as he appeared. He knew the old Army advice for shavetails, "Find a good sergeant and stick to him." The sergeant of the guard was a grizzled old sufferer who had been through it all many, many times. He engineered the

guard mount and posted the guard. Then Tommy drew him to one side.

"What do I do now, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Well, the lieutenant has to inspect the guard three times, once between midnight and six o'clock in the morning. First ask them for their special orders, and then for their general orders. If they make a mistake, I'll nudge you and you say, 'Correct him, Sergeant,' and I'll fix him up. It's getting dark now. Would the Lieutenant like to make his first inspection before supper?"

Inspection was a hectic affair. The guard was composed of cadets who had joined the Army to fly and remained in it to mount guard, and it was their intention to make it as interesting as possible for all concerned, especially their superiors. But the old sergeant was equal to the occasion. He steered Tommy by the traps planted for him, and then showed him the guardhouse.

There the commander of the guard ate his slum and then returned to his barrack. Long John grabbed him by the arm as he entered.

"That frog was around again today, and he brought

a lot of stuff," he whispered. "You're in on it. Doc is goin' to make punch. Be around at nine o'clock."

* * * * *

Tommy was there at the appointed time. At the far end a crowd was gathered. Men were perched as closely as possible on the double-deck bunks. In their midst Bacchanalian rites were in progress. "Doc," a stout man with a red, satyr-like countenance, was beating a huge bowl of eggs. Before him within easy reach and frequently applied, was an assorted row of bottles. Tommy read some of the labels, Cherry Brandy, Martell, D. O. M., Absinthe.

"My God," he muttered to himself, "everything but nitroglycerine."

The party was undoubtedly a success. There were songs and dances and stories. Finally it got to the speechmaking stage. An interruption in the form of a volley of shots was welcome to every one except the current performer. A trampling of feet, and then more shots followed. A voice at the other end of the barrack shouted "Attention!" as Major Krause stumbled in. He had evidently been running, but he tried to stalk around in a dignified manner. Somebody whispered, "Those damn cadets have been shooting

off their guns and raising hell again, and he's been trying to catch them."

The major approached the end of the barrack where the party had been in progress. He sniffed suspiciously, but the punch-bowl had been shoved under a bunk and the bottles into boots, and there was no evidence in sight. Finally he asked, "Are there any guns in this barrack?"

"No," Tommy spoke up. "I know, because I was trying to borrow one this afternoon to mount guard with."

A partially suppressed titter rose and fell again. The C. O. wheeled around furiously.

"So it's you again, is it?" he thundered. "Carousing in here while your superiors attend to your duties. Get out to your guard and put a stop to that indiscriminate shooting. I swear if I see you again tonight I'll prefer charges and have you broke!"

Tommy stumbled out into the darkness and headed in what he thought was the direction of the guardhouse. His head was buzzing painfully. A volley of shots sounded somewhere in front of him. He felt vaguely that he ought to do something about it, and

ran in that direction, only to fall over the guy-rope of a hangar and fall heavily. More shots behind him. He got up and staggered on. Suddenly there was a flash and a report right before him. Then a voice yelled, "Halt."

"Commander of the guard," bawled Tommy.

A dark figure loomed up vaguely in the murk. He struck a match and saw a grinning cadet working the bolt of his rifle and waving the muzzle around dangerously. Suddenly it exploded and Tommy felt mud splatter over him.

"I thought I saw something moving and halted it, and it wouldn't halt, so I fired, but I don't understand this gun very well, sir," said the cadet, still working at the bolt.

The commander of the guard turned and fled. He was getting dizzier every minute. Finally he tripped over another guy-rope and fell, to rise no more.

When he woke, it was with the consciousness of having been annoyed for a long time by a rasping noise which was still going on. He tried to pull himself together and think. He could vaguely discern the bulk of a hangar. There was a queer, unexplained rasping. Filed wires, Wings coming off ...Funerals.

The noise stopped, and presently a dark figure crept out through the hangar door and started to steal away. Tommy drew the little automatic from its holster and fired. The next thing he realized was that there were flashlights and men everywhere. The sergeant of the guard. Major Krause. Calls for explanation. Tommy tried to explain. A voice said, "You fool, you've shot the adjutant!" Strong hands seized him and hustled him away.

* * * * *

Next morning, when a detail came to the guardhouse, Tommy was still in a daze. The leader told him to police up, as he was to go before the C. O. He was still confused when he was led into the office at headquarters.

The commanding officer was there, and Captain La Croix, the French officer who advised as to instruction. Also a large, fierce man with stars on his shoulders, and a little civilian with glasses and a trench coat several sizes too large for him. Tommy's legs seemed to be made of butter.

Major Krause was speaking, and strange to say, his voice was not unkind.

"Lieutenant Lang," he said, "I revoke everything I said yesterday. You have done a great service for your country. I regret to say that a small file was found on the body of the adjutant, and that some of the ships were found to have been tampered with so skillfully that detection was very unlikely. Inspection of the adjutant's papers brought out evidence that he was an Austrian citizen. Tell the general and the secretary how you came to discover what was going on."

"Well," blurted Tommy, "it was this way. I was dizzy and fell down two or three times and finally I decided to go to sleep. Then some guy kept making a filing noise and waking me up, so I shot him."

* * * * *

That evening three flying lieutenants were finishing an illicit meal of chicken and champagne at a little French inn about three miles from the field, and the smallest of the trio was finishing a story.

"There was a long argument," he said, "and the general and the major were all for preferring charges, but Captain La Croix stood up for me and said I was a good pilot, and finally they agreed to let him get me transferred to a French observation squadron at the front."

The tall man and the fat one looked at each other and at their little companion. Then they ejaculated as one... “You lucky little stiff!”

THE END

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H. P. S. Greene

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Sonia Haft Greene Lovecraft Davis (March 16, 1883 – December 26, 1972) was an American one-time pulp fiction writer and amateur publisher, businesswoman and milliner who bankrolled several fanzines in the early twentieth century.

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